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ABSTRACT

A study examined the emergent patterns and anomalies of adult readers as they unload information from their long term memory into their retellings of text. Participants were 16 graduate students enrolled in a Reading Education Seminar at Indiana University. Participants formed a heterogeneous group which included speakers of six different languages and whose command of spoken English varied widely. The data were collected as blind-coded verbatim transcriptions of the recorded oral retellings. After interpreting and classifying the content independently, a tentative taxonomy was established in concert which was derived from the observed content of the retellings. All transcriptions were analyzed independently by four researchers for the following elements: generalization, thesis statement, major points, supporting details, supplementations, coherence, completeness, and comprehensibility. The blind transcriptions were identified by name and their content and rating were reviewed in relation to the known facts about nationality, educational and cultural background, familiarity with the text selected, and whether the participants spoke English as a native, a second, or a foreign language. Results included three major findings: (1) although participants came from various cultural and educational backgrounds, a majority of them repeatedly mentioned and expanded upon certain key points from the text; (2) many readers who expressed familiarity with or interest in the topic prior to reading the passage showed a higher incidence of reader perspective; and (3) the richness of the retelling affected the overall rating. (Two appendixes containing a data summary and taxonomy are attached.) (MG)

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EXPLORING RETELLINGS AS ASSESSMENT: INSIGHTS AND PATTERNS

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EXPLORING RETELLINGS AS ASSESSMENT: INSIGHTS AND PATTERNS

The construction of meaning for text is one of the most important and most difficult reading comprehension skills to understand. Verbal reports on concurrent thinking have been widely used in order to understand the kinds of cognitive processes that readers use when they move through text. Protocols from these verbal reports have been able to expose certain cognitive terrains not reported before. However, studies of cognitive processes used within the textual territory--if we may use this term for the text proper--have only tapped the short term memory (STM) capacity of the reader. How information is sorted out and later stored in long term memory (LTM) has never really been understood, although Minsky (1975), Schank and Abelson (1977), and Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) did attempt to conceptualize this storage in terms of "frames", "scripts", and a model of the "reading comprehension network."

It might also be possible to trace storage through the verbal process of retelling--when the reader is required to take what he/she had stored from LTM, sort it out in STM and present it in a new text--a text which is the reader's own creation. This new creation will vary according to the reader's LTM storage capacity, and his/her own style of retelling, again based on his/her method of negotiating the various forces that impinge on the reading itself (such as the reader's goals, knowledge of the author's intention, and the context of the reading). A retelling does not necessarily imply a perfect match of the old and the new texts because unless the reader has a photographic mind, the concept of template matching will only be a gross oversimplification of the complex processes of text comprehension, summarization, and text

storage. The "selection", "instantiation", and "refinement" (Spiro, 1980) of what is to be "retold" will depend on the purpose of the retelling itself. However, it would also be possible to deduce these processes (of selection, instantiation, and refinement) from the product of the reader's retelling.

This is the purpose of this study--to examine the emergent patterns and anomalies of adult readers as they unload information from their LTM into their retellings. Through these patterns (and anomalies) we hope to get a better picture of the readers, not only as interpreters, but as constructors and producers of meaning. We also hope by using retellings, to develop insights for viable alternative procedures in the assessment of reading comprehension.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were twenty graduate students enrolled in a Reading Education Seminar at Indiana University during the Spring of 1989. The students had previously done several oral retellings but had received little or no feedback on their work. The participants formed a very heterogeneous group which included speakers of six different languages and whose command of spoken English varied widely. The non-native English speakers' educational and cultural experience in the United States ranged from four months to several years.

Instructions

The instructions were to orient the reader while not setting rigid guidelines as to the length, structure, format, or content of the retelling. The formal instructions read: "After completing the reading put it aside. You will now need someone to whom to retell the reading.

With the tape recorder on, explain to your listener what the reading was about. Have your listener ask any questions AFTER the retelling is completed. Give as complete a retelling as possible. The oral retelling should be spontaneous. Don't worry about sounding eloquent or speaking in completely grammatical sentences." The text read by the participants was Chapter 2 of Current Thinking: A Semiotic Perspective by Siegel and Carey (1989).

Procedure for data analysis

The data was collected as blind-coded verbatim transcription of the recorded oral retellings. No correlation of transcriptions and personal data was done until the analysis of emergent patterns was completed. Two participants did not return their retelling data. Two other data sets were held for future study because the participants disregarded the instructions and engaged in discussions with their listener rather than performing a retelling. A total of sixteen transcriptions remained for analysis. All transcriptions were analyzed several times, independently and jointly by the four researchers. After interpreting and classifying the content independently, a tentative taxonomy was established in concert. The taxonomy was derived from the observed content of the retellings. The researchers agree that this taxonomy is neither definitive nor exhaustive but is a convenient vehicle with which the content of the retelling transcriptions can be discussed.

Post-taxonomy analysis

A richness rating scale based on Irwin and Mitchell's (1983) was used to determine what relationship, if any, existed between the richness of a retelling and its content as determined by the taxonomy which

had surfaced from our data. All transcriptions were analyzed independently by the four researchers for the following elements: generalizations, thesis statement, major points, supporting details, supplementations, coherence, completeness, and comprehensibilty. Each element was assigned a score from 1 to 5 and given an equal weight in order to get an average richness rating for each retelling. Ratings were compared and discussed until a concensus was reached for all transcriptions.

Finally, the blind transcriptions were identified by name and their content and rating were reviewed in relation to the known facts about nationality, educational and cultural background, familiarity with the text selected for this research, and whether the participants spoke English as natives, as a second or as a foreign language. Post-study interviews with some of the participants provided additional related data.

RESULTS

Emergent patterns

In studying the similarities of elements in the retellings, the researchers found a variety of recurring patterns. The first category to take shape grew out of the readers' repetition of certain ideas present in the text. The readers emphasized, supported, and expanded upon these recurring ideas which we termed key concepts/main ideas. Since the readers used text-based details to clarify and elaborate on these recurring ideas, the second category became obvious; readers' mention of text-based details were termed specifics. Content in the other remaining text-based elements found in the retellings varied widely. Instances when the participants seemed to draw information from the text and put it in their own words were eventually placed in the category we

named paraphrasing and summarization. To a varying degree, readers also mentioned elements that were not drawn directly from the reading which showed elements of personal involvement with the text. Six categories of this nature ultimately emerged which we grouped together as reader perspective.

The first subcategory that surfaced was intertextuality, wherein a reader mentioned familiarity with concepts or related information based on other specific sources: authors, texts, lectures, discussions. The second subcategory, level of difficulty, consisted of comments reflecting the readers' ease or discomfort with some content of the text. Some readers expressed agreement or disagreement with the author, the text or some particular point in the text. These were called verification. We also felt that in some cases no evidence of agreement or disagreement might indicate neutrality or a withholding of the reader's opinion. Other readers took information from the text in order to hypothesize or make further stipulations. These statements were subcategorized as predictions and conclusions. Still other statements were evaluative in nature or attempted to assess elements of the text and were grouped under the heading critical assessment. The final subcategory consisted of readers' inferences which were colored by personal opinions, biases, experiences, and prior knowledge. Inferences of this type were termed generalizations.

For the complete taxonomy showing the number of occurrences of all categories for all readers see Appendix A. Representative examples of each element of the taxonomy are given in Appendix B.

Final results

Our results include three major findings. We first noted that

although participants in the study came from various cultural and educational backgrounds, a majority of them repeatedly mentioned certain key points from the text. Generally, these points were then expanded upon. These key concepts fell within a range that enabled the listener to understand the gist of the text being retold.

Secondly, we found that many readers who expressed familiarity with or interest in the topic prior to reading the passage, showed a higher incidence of reader perspective. Differences in participants' cultural and educational backgrounds affected the incidence of reader perspective. Readers who had recently arrived at Indiana University from Asian cultures tended to mention many specific details while withholding what we have termed reader perspective. In discussing this with us later, our Asian participants stated that they were accustomed to learning by memorizing information in detail because of their educational expectations. The American participants' learning styles, on the other hand, allowed them to freely express their opinions and feelings. Such differences in learning styles were reflected in the degree of incidence of reader perspective and in the amount of specific recall included in participants' retellings.

Thirdly, using a rating scale based on Irwin and Mitchell's (1983), we found that the richness of the retelling affected the overall rating. However, retellings which received lower richness ratings still included some key concepts, although in varying frequency. Thus, it seems that if comprehension has occurred, literate adult readers tend to mention the same key concepts, regardless of personal style or language fluency. There was generally a positive correlation between the richness of the retelling and the total number of occurrences with-

in all categories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to search for patterns and insights into the storage and retrieval of information through the retellings of a set of adult readers at the university level. From the data gathered, we also hoped to develop insights for viable alternative procedures for the assessment of reading comprehension.

In the on-going discussion of our research, some considerations on application have emerged. In order to use retellings as assessment, objectives must be kept in mind. Our main objectives for using retellings have been to check comprehension and to see what kind of information is retained in LTM for retelling. The data set was examined carefully to see what the readers included or excluded in an effort to make meaning in their newly created texts. For our group of adult readers we found two kinds of information storage, depending on reading intent. For some readers, storage was of a more global nature, as from a "point-driven" perspective--i.e. the raison d'etre or point that the author wished to impart was grasped by the reader through "a social, pragmatic, and interpersonal transaction" with the writer (Polanyi, 1979). For others, storage seemed "information-driven"--i.e. when the reader's goal was to learn or remember the material itself. In this case, reading was more text-based (de Beaugrande, 1982).

Based on our data, we suggest that caution be taken to draw key concepts/main ideas from the students or their data set rather than designing a template based on the teacher's ideas. While the main ideas for the participants were in the same range as those of the individual researchers, the main ideas for a fourth grader may differ somewhat

from those of the teacher. Further research must be done with less proficient and young readers to determine how and why main point selection occurs, rather than assuming that the teacher always knows which main ideas are the "correct" ones.

Our experience with retellings in the classroom has shown that they are implemented easily, by practicing them as a whole-class or small group activity to allow the readers to assimilate the procedure. Nevertheless, we discovered that care must be taken to provide proper preparation for the introduction of such new conventions. The need for such preparation was witnessed in several data-gathering sessions with adult readers during this project. Teachers must state their expectations clearly for readers to understand the instructions. As was evident in our research, adult participants who had previously done oral retellings interpreted the given instructions in accordance with their own perspective and educational and cultural experience. The retellings therefore ranged from formal, to detailed, to conversational.

Various techniques can be taught to help broaden the students' range of reading strategies and behaviors. Readers who include little or no reader perspective in their retellings may need to practice verbalizing their own ideas. The class or small groups might discuss ways of including their personal feelings and experiences in their retellings, as well as how to include information from other readings, classes and discussions. Those from different backgrounds could share the differences and similarities of their educational expectations and learning experiences. Reinforcement from others may increase the value of reader perspective in retellings, as well as in other activities. If readers' retellings show a lack of specific details supporting main

ideas, they may need to examine ways of elaborating. The inverse may be true for other readers who have trouble making generalizations or summarizing; they may need to practice strategies for text reduction or simply discuss how to put things in their own words concisely. Since readers interact differently with text, we suggest having them share personal reading strategies in collaborative reading activities allowing them to benefit from others.

Two supplemental studies included oral retelling as one of the protocols in their research, one in Spain with native Spanish speakers majoring in English at the university level (Chandler, 1989) and one in Malaysia with undergraduate students in TESL whose second language is English (Mustapha, 1989). The results from these two studies provide more insights into the use of retellings for assessment of reading comprehension.

Participants in Spain had been informed of the activities they would perform after the reading. For one of the three readings only a comprehension check was anticipated. For the others, readers understood that upon completion of the reading they would give an oral retelling to the researcher or his assistant. This exercise would then be followed by a comprehension check. All the readers commented that they read differently depending on the purpose of the reading.

Reader involvement in text selection can also affect performance (Chandler, 1989). Since several participants in the Indiana study had made comments in their retellings about the reading passage they had read, the participants in Spain were monitored for reactions to the reading materials. All participants in Spain expressed dislike for one reading passage and made 36% more errors on the comprehension check

for that reading.

Malaysian participants working in their second language, English, read the same passage used in the IU study (Mustapha, 1989). They mentioned key concepts within the same range as those of the Indiana participants. Educational expectations of the Malaysians were reflected in the higher incidence of specific information mentioned in their retellings. In using several protocols to study reading comprehension, Mustapha found that retellings situated post-reading activities. Students tended to elaborate upon the main points with which they were most familiar in their retrospective think alouds and freewrites.

Since the oral retellings in the Indiana data set were found to be strongly text-based, it at first seemed difficult to get at the mental processes which had occurred during the reading. Nevertheless, our research showed that readers do use a variety of procedures to organize information and construct meaning for text. These strategies varied among the population of our study. Further research by the authors using sets of protocols such as think alouds, oral retellings, and freewrites may reveal connections made through some or all of these reading activities which will add to the understanding of the mental processes used by readers while making meaning.

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APPENDIX A

Data summary by column

1 = Richness rating

2 = Reader number

3 = K-Key concepts/main ideas

4 = S-Specifics

5 = P-Paraphrasing/summarization

6 = R-Total incidence of reader perspective

7 = RA-Level of difficulty

8 = RB-Verification

9 = RC-Predictions/conclusions

10 = RD-Critical assessment

11 = RE-Generalizations colored by reader inference

12 = I-Intertextuality

13 = T-Total occurrences of all categories

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Rating	READER	K	S	P	R:	(RA	RB	RC	RD	RE	I)	T
2.5	00	2	6	6	5	-	1	-	-	-	4	19
4.25	01	6	14	7	9	1	2	1	1	3	1	36
3.0	02	5	19	13	14	2	3	1	-	6	2	51
2.0	03	2	4	6	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	12
3.25	05	3	2	11	6	-	-	5	-	1	-	22
4.75	07	7	46	11	28	-	2	4	2	15	5	92
4.25	09	4	11	12	14	-	4	-	2	1	7	41
2.0	10	2	4	6	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	13
2.25	11	2	2	10	12	1	1	5	1	4	-	26
2.5	12	3	11	5	4	-	2	-	-	2	-	23
2.75	13	3	10	8	5	1	-	4	-	-	-	26
3.75	15	3	9	9	2	-	-	-	1	1	-	23
2.5	16	3	9	22	8	-	5	2	-	1	-	42
2.0	18	3	5	1	4	-	-	-	-	4	-	13
4.25	19	5	5	11	4	-	2	1	-	1	-	25
4.5	20	4	13	5	23	-	8	5	2	7	1	45

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF RETELLING CATEGORIES (Identified by reader number):

Key concepts/main ideas. #13. One of the main things here is that critical thinking is reflective skepticism.

Specifics. #19. Ennis shows the 12 aspects of critical thinking.

Paraphrasing and summarization. #09. He [McPeck] feels that the background knowledge, his knowledge in the various disciplines that is within him, will then interact with the text.

READER PERSPECTIVE

Intertextuality. #07. I mean, that's the premise a lot of books offer.

Level of difficulty. #01 Anyway the second chapter is very easy to understand.

Verification. #00. It was not Ennis that said that.

Predictions and conclusions. #14. Critical thinkers are better thinkers.

Critcal assessment. #07. Well, Ennis' 12 aspects are basically very sterile, not context specific type processes that people really go through.

Generalizations. #11. I mean, if we keep on teaching the students just the rules, they will not be able to apply those rules to topics, to knowledge domains that they do not have any information on.